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Salvadorans Training At U.S. Sites in Panama

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PANAMA CITY—The United States is in the process of training as many 300 Salvadoran military officers at its Panama Canal area military schools in how to deal with suspected guerrillas in their country while observing human rights.

The decision to begin the instruction, taken last summer without fanfare by the Carter administration and the military-civilian government it backs in El Salvador, is described by U.S. officials here as "extremely sensitive" and "experimental."

The training represents a significant compromise among the disparate elements of the Washington bureaucracy on the extent to which the United States should support the Salvadoran military and reinforce its ability to deal with a growing guerrilla opposition and control its population in an increasingly war-torn environment.

El Salvador for years has been a battleground between rich and poor, right and left. But in the past year, since the Carter administration began taking an intense interest in its fate, it has become a center of confrontation among the State Department, the Pentagon and the intelligence community.

The training by U.S. personnel of Salvadoran lieutenants, captains and noncommissioned officers in Panama follows a heated debate within the administration last winter about plans to send three dozen U.S. military training teams into El Salvador to teach basic discipline and skills to the armed forces there.

That proposal, strongly supported by the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency, was vehemently opposed by a number of State Department officials, including U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White, who argued that it would be interpreted in San Salvador as a return to U.S. counterinsurgency policy in Central America.

Already, the Panama compromise program is perceived in the region as further evidence of the United States' growing identification with El Salvador's increasingly conservative government, which took over from a rightist military dictatorship under promises of reform one year ago.

The training program has become the focus of an intense propaganda campaign on the part of Central American leftists, and U.S. officials fear it may complicate negotiations with Panama on the fate of U.S. military schools here, now that the transition to Panamanian control of the former Canal Zone has begun.

White, a career diplomat regarded as one of the toughest spokesmen for the administration's human rights and reform policy in Latin America, has been a central figure in the controversy throughout.

"White is the guy that is calling all the shots in El Salvador," said one U.S. military official here. According to both diplomatic and intelligence sources, White has opposed any major CIA or Pentagon interference in the policy the State Department has laid out for the country.

Soon after White arrived in El Salvador last April, he oversaw the replacement of the CIA station chief at the embassy. These sources said that White has since discouraged the CIA's head of Central American operations from visiting the country.

Lt. Gen. Wallace H. Nutting, chief of the U.S. Southern Command based in Panama and responsible for the military security of the region, has asked to visit El Salvador on several occasions and has been told by White not to come because of "bad timing."

White essentially has maintained that the solution to El Salvador's problems will have to be political, social and economic—that the military threat from the guerrillas trying to topple the U.S.-backed government is, over the long run, the least dangerous factor, and that elements within the military itself may threaten the government.

Military and intelligence officials emphasized the need to back up the Salvadoran Army as much as possible.

"This is not purely a political problem," Gen. Nutting said recently. "There's violence, military action. The solution as it appears to me would be a political-military solution."

Nutting denied that he had any serious disagreements with White, said he was aware of the social and economic problems and expressed belief that steps should be taken to improve them.

Nutting did not see any possibility of direct U.S. military intervention in El Salvador. But he added, "Unfortunately a lot of people are unwilling to consider a more active involvement as a result of Vietnam . . . The problem is how do you manage the situation so they [the Salvadoran soldiers] are left to do it themselves . . . My own view is that the Salvadoran forces need to improve their proficiency in a technical, professional sense, and if we can do that I think we should."

One way of doing this, planned as long as a year ago, was to send U.S. military training teams into El Salvador, fewer than 50 men altogether, to teach basic discipline and skills to the Salvadoran armed forces.

White vehemently objected to any such move. "I just didn't want them in the country," White said in an interview. "It would involve the United States in an on-the-ground situation in a country in revolution and put us right in the middle." He added, however, that he had no objection to some forms of military aid.

White agreed to a plan to send $5.7 million worth of nonlethal military aid to the government.

In the months since, basic economic reforms have been put into effect. The Salvadoran left, which was growing ever more unified earlier this year, shows signs of breaking up along the old philosophical lines that kept it divided for most of the 1970s. The once broad-based civilian-military junta has grown increasingly conservative, with power now concentrated in the hands of the most conservative military commanders.

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